The Call of High Mountains

by ***Ir. Chin Mee Poon***

TREKKING in the high mountains of Nepal is an exhilarating experience.

I can vouch for the above statement because I have gone trekking in Nepal, not once, but three times. In March 2001, I did the Jomsom Trek in eight days. In October 2006, I trekked from Lukla to Chomolungma (Everest) Base Camp and back in 12 days. And in October 2009, I completed the Annapurna Circuit in 18 days. I will continue to go back to Nepal to answer the call of the high mountains there. Trekking, someone once said, is addictive.

Nepal is a mountainous country. About two third of the country is covered by the mighty Himalayas and their foothills. Many people who live in the mountains and villages are connected by footpaths only. Other than mules and yaks, the villagers' own legs are their only means of transport.

About 80% of Nepal's tourists are there to answer the call of the mountains. From Kathmandu, the capital city, the trekkers will find their way to different parts of the country and disappear into the mountains for periods of time ranging from a few days to a few months. Most of them trek in groups, each with a guide and a number of porters to take care of their main luggage, arranged through one of the many trekking agencies in Kathmandu or Pokhara. There are also independent trekkers who trek with a very detailed trekking map in hand, carrying their own backpacks and looking for their own tea-houses.

Trekkers walk on the same paths as the villagers. They typically do not walk more than 15km a day. There are many villages on the way, each studded with a good selection of tea-houses. A tea-house is where a trekker can find very basic but generally clean accommodation and food.

Bearing in mind that virtually everything that the tea-houses provide has to be transported from the lowland by mule caravans or on porters' back, food and other consumables are understandably more expensive than in the cities, but still very affordable.

The peak trekking season runs from early October till end of November when the days are invariably sunny, the sky so blue and the clouds, if any, so white, perfect for photography. Another high trekking season runs from March to May.

There are many trekking trails one can choose from, each ranked according to the level of physical fitness required. One can also choose from among trails of various lengths to suit the amount of time available. Whatever choice one may make, one can be assured of witnessing some of the most spectacular mountains views in the world that only a trekker will have the chance to see.

It is no wonder that Nepal is one of the most popular trekking destinations in the world. ■